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PUBLIC HEALTH AND POLITICS

BY EDWARD A. MOREE,

Assistant Secretary of the New York State Charities Aid Association.

Words, like children, suffer terribly from faulty environment. "Politics" has been cramped, stunted and morally corrupted by its environment. There is no word in the English language that describes a more important field of human welfare and service. Yet what word expresses more contempt to the minds of many good people than the term "politician" or "professional politician"?

That is why the invitation to prepare this article was a request for a paper on "Ridding Public Health and Welfare Administration of Politics." "Politics," to the one who framed that title, means or rather connotes the same evils that are expressed by the word to probably a majority of people. It means, not public service and an activity in the affairs of the community, but corrupt politics, partisan politics, politics for the purpose of personal or party aggrandizement

Now if we were to actually rid public health of politics we would strike out "public." Public health out of politics means merely the private practice of medicine.

The best way to rid public health and social welfare activities of politics is to put them into politics so definitely and so completely that the "politician," so called, will always realize, in dealing with these subjects, that they are matters of such vast importance in the every-day life of the people that the voters will not tolerate their employment by the "organization" for its own advancement, to the detriment of the agencies themselves.

In other words, I would erect before each social service agency, a gong and a sign. I would say on that sign: "Stop—Look—Listen. Look out for the public opinion express. This belongs to the public. Trespassers who fail to get out of the way of the engine will be run down!"

It is not difficult to establish a proper attitude towards social welfare activities in the mind of the politician. Let me say, parenthetically, that in referring to politician I do not in any way dis-

parage the man in public life, either the office holder or the man who directs the affairs of political organizations. The politician, or possibly I should say the elected official or political manager, is quick to seize upon policies that are popular. The one who doesn't soon goes into the discard. The wise political leader of all times has recognized certain fields in the public's affairs that were well placarded with "No Trespass" signs. The old-time politician occasionally disregarded these signs. Through a consistent working out of the law of natural selection, that kind of a politician has, to a degree, become a relic of an older and less enlightened time. The politician has acquired an instinct akin to a child's avoidance of a hot poker.

Recognizing, of course, that certain forms of government are particularly suited to advance the interests of the self-seeking politician, and that other forms no longer experimental seem well calculated to make more difficult the abuse of social welfare activities by political organizations, the author does not concern himself in this paper with governmental forms.

The most ardent supporter of the commission form of government for cities, of broad gauged reforms in county government and the cabinet system in the state government, will agree that in the last analysis the fact of good or bad government depends upon the kind of person administering it. Provide simplicity; provide clear lines of responsibility; provide adequate checks and balances and do away with district representation carried to an extreme in the administration of state, county and city affairs, and you have done about all that you can do by statute to eliminate the evil of partisan commercial politics.

Fundamentally, then, we are striving in all of our governmental reforms, to make it easier for the voter to get at the official responsible for maladministration. In other words, we are bringing governmental affairs out into the open, displaying them where all may view them, so that the honest, efficient official may be rewarded, and the dishonest, inefficient official may be effectively damned.

A "reform movement" is merely an attempt to focus public opinion on the particular phase of public affairs that needs—at least in the minds of the reform group—to be corrected. Realizing, then, that upon the voters themselves, in the last analysis, rests the responsibility for keeping *evil* partisan politics out of social wel-

fare activities, we must face not only the problem of stimulating interest in public affairs, but also the problem of so organizing the voters' interest that effective machinery will be provided for informing them as to what is going on, and in refocussing, as occasion demands, the public opinion which everyone knows exists, in support of efficient administration.

This problem is especially vital in the newer fields of social welfare activities. Labor departments are relatively new; departments of charities, with their immense institutions and large pay-rolls; prison departments with their prolific opportunities for graft and maladministration; and probably the newest important field of social welfare work, and the one with which the writer happens to be most familiar, the departments of health—are all comparatively recent additions to our governmental responsibilities.

Originally governmental function was restricted practically to police duty, at home and abroad, and to the duty of levying and collecting taxes for the support of that function.

People have long realized the importance of protecting the public treasury and the other original governmental interests from graft and inefficiency. They have set up all sorts of statutory protective devices. In the newer fields of public work, however, we have seen in recent years many disgraceful efforts to prostitute social welfare for party aggrandizement. These attempts have usually gone on until the voters have realized the extent to which the new activities affected the welfare of each individual. Then politicians and parties have received rude awakenings and the raids have ceased.

To meet this situation, and to serve as perpetual warning sign posts, and to focus public attention on the conduct of social governmental activities, there have sprung up all kinds of associations of private citizens brought together for the purpose of stimulating interest in various fields, and focussing public opinion on especially grave evils as they develop. To this new development is due in large measure the growth of a new attitude on the part of politicians toward social welfare activities.

The names of these organizations are significant of their purpose, and illustrate very well the growing recognition of the importance of stimulating and keeping alive public interest in public affairs.

Among these are our municipal leagues, city clubs, citizens' unions, legislative voters associations, civil service reform associations and public health associations. Closely allied to these are many organizations whose main purposes are other than that of interest in governmental affairs but who interest themselves more or less constantly in certain phases of national, state and local administrations. Among the latter are the grange, women's clubs, churches, lodges, labor unions and even organizations of officials themselves, such as state conferences of mayors, tax officials and other state and national organizations of elected or appointed officials.

The remaining space allotted for the presentation of this topic can best be employed by an account of a rather spectacular campaign to focus public opinion on the work of the New York State Department of Health, that succeeded in defeating one of the strongest political moves that could well be conceived.

In order to give an accurate picture of the situation, it will be necessary to give a short account of certain important developments that lead up to it. In this account, in order to fix clearly in the mind of the reader the political significance of certain events with which this article deals, persons and parties are referred to. It should be said here, however, that the author in no way questions the sincerity of their motives. The strengthening of a political organization is a highly important public duty. Those who opposed the attempted health legislation in New York State in 1915 believed that the public was served by preventing the building up of the organization at the expense of efficiency in such a highly important social welfare activity as the department of health.

Legislators who lent their support to the move to reorganize the state department of health did so, no doubt, from what they considered worthy motives. It is also undoubtedly true that their attitude was due to lack of information as to the standards that had been applied by the health commissioner in making his appointments in the reorganized department. They believed, from many sad experiences with similarly reorganized departments, that it had been done on a political basis, and that a desire for patronage had been the controlling motive with the opposing party in the enactment of the laws upon which the reorganization was based. It is only fair to say that many of the men who supported the bills

entirely changed their attitude when they knew the facts, and understood the spirit of social service that had actuated the commissioner throughout.

In 1913, the governor, Senate and Assembly being Democratic, a commission was appointed by Governor Sulzer to investigate the public health law and its administration. Based upon this commission's investigation a new health law was enacted, creating a public health council with power to enact a sanitary code for the whole state to take the place of the fourteen hundred antiquated sanitary codes then in existence in the fourteen hundred different towns and villages; creating nine divisions in the department of health; creating at least twenty sanitary districts, the health work of each of which should be under a sanitary supervisor; increasing the term of the commissioner to six years, and increasing his compensation, and in various other ways strengthening the law and increasing the department's opportunity to apply to the state's health work the scientific principles which have been developed by modern medical research. Public health experts in all parts of the country have declared the law a model and look upon it as a most progressive and important step in health legislation.

In 1914 Governor Glynn, a Democrat, appointed Dr. Hermann M. Biggs, who happened to be a Democrat, as commissioner, and the work of reorganizing the department of health began, along the lines established by the health commission, of which he was chairman. The appointment was in no sense political and the department was organized on the basis of merit alone. The reorganization of the department was substantially completed, and the work was fairly under way, when the legislature convened on January 1, 1915.

With a Republican governor, and a Republican Senate and Assembly, it was only natural that serious consideration should be given to a department headed by a Democrat appointed by a Democratic governor under the provisions of a law passed by a Democratic legislature and signed by another Democratic governor. Such proved to be the case for soon after the legislature convened disturbing rumors were heard in Albany as to the intentions of certain leaders of the majority in reference to the state department of health.

Confidential information from legislators who, by reason of

their prominence in the counsels of the majority, were competent to speak, indicated that there was a well-defined intention on the part of certain members of the majority to revise the public health law so as to make the position of commissioner untenable by the present incumbent, and to generally reduce the department's staff and its opportunity for advanced health work.

The State Charities Aid Association, an unofficial volunteer organization, receiving no public funds, through its tuberculosis committee had become impressed with the necessity for maintaining the efficiency of the state's health work. This natural interest in the legislature's attitude toward the health department was enhanced by the fact that the association had taken an active part in the investigation that preceded the introduction of the new public health law, and an even more active part in the campaign to secure its adoption.

The first formal statement as to the intention of the majority of the legislature in regard to the health department came on March 14. In announcing a program for the following weeks of the legislative session, the majority leader of the Senate stated that the appropriations for the department of health would be cut in half.

The effort to maintain the department and its admirable organization dated from that announcement, although previously the association had undertaken by circular letters and newspaper publicity to focus public opinion on the need for an appropriation for a tuberculosis division, and the need for adequate appropriations for the educational work of the department.

On March 23, the majority leader of the Assembly introduced the first of five bills, whose enactment would have greatly crippled the efficiency of the department. The association's work in support of the health department thereafter became most active and from April 1 was as intensive and effective as the association could make it.

These bills, if they had been enacted, would have made the position untenable by Doctor Biggs and would have driven out several of the division directors; would have made the establishment of sanitary districts by the commissioner discretionary instead of mandatory; would have reduced the number of districts to ten and would have reduced the salary of the sanitary supervisors to \$2,500; would have made the establishment of the nine divisions

of the department discretionary instead of mandatory. They would have stricken out of the health law the provision requiring the public health council to prescribe the qualifications of directors of divisions, sanitary supervisors, local health officers and public health nurses, thereby making it impossible to restrict the applicants for these positions to persons properly qualified to hold them. They would have required the sanitary code to be submitted to the legislature for approval before it could have the effect of law and would have repealed the present excellent sanitary code.

It is needless to describe to sane thinking men what the effect of the enactment of these bills would have been. We now know, for sure, as we had always assumed to be the case, that the department would have been safe even if the bills had passed the legislature, for Governor Charles S. Whitman would have vetoed them. The governor's admirable address before the American Public Health Association at Rochester was a whole-hearted intelligent endorsement of Doctor Biggs and his work and evinced a most encouragingly far-seeing interest in progressive health work. It nevertheless seemed wise to relieve the governor, as much as possible, of pressure from legislative leaders in this regard. No effort was spared, therefore, to defeat the bills in the legislative stage.

The campaign for the defeat of these five bills and for adequate appropriations for the department was essentially a campaign of publicity. It put a warning sign post all over the public health field in New York state. It was a successful endeavor to focus upon the legislature the public's opinion of the work of the state department of health. The association believed that the department had firmly entrenched itself in the public mind for the first time in the history of the state as an efficient organization working out a well-considered program for the reduction of the state's death rate by the application of the principles established by modern medical research. The problem presented, therefore, was to find means of expressing this sentiment to the leaders of the legislature. The success of the association's efforts was due, not merely to the methods employed, but also, and to very larger degree, to the fact that the department's work justified all that could be said in praise of it.

So great was the protest against the attacks on the department

that all of the five bills were defeated and the department was granted nearly adequate appropriations, although the appropriation bill carried the salaries of only ten of the twenty supervisors. Besides this, six bills which had been introduced in the Assembly and four in the Senate, all of them practically identical, and which would have stricken from the health law the minimum wage for health officers, failed of passage.

It seems likely that readers of *The Annals* may be interested in a short description of the details of the campaign. The plan involved first the creation of a psychological background of general newspaper publicity. We felt that against such a background our letters appealing for definite action and for the organization of meetings would bring better results. Second, we sent representatives into the field to organize meetings and to learn the extent and the kind of sentiment in the various localities, and to bring that sentiment before the legislature in the form of resolutions, letters, telegrams and newspaper articles. Third, of course, we requested and were granted hearings before the committees of the legislature to which the various bills had been referred. The publicity campaign extending over a period of six weeks involved the following efforts:

- 9 newspaper articles were mailed to 168 daily newspapers.
- 3 news articles were mailed to 866 daily and weekly papers.
- 2 stereotype plate articles, one column each, were expressed to a list of 440 daily and weekly papers.
- Space was purchased in 55 of the leading up-state newspapers, in which was published a stereotype, two-column argument against the Hinman bills and in favor of adequate health appropriations. This reached a circulation of 851,538 and, judged by advertisers' estimates, was read by not less than three times that number, or 2,544,614 persons. The article indicated by its form that it was published in paid-for space.
- 866 letters were sent to the daily newspapers, thanking them for their coöperation and suggesting further possible editorials.
- 37 personal letters were sent to editors on a specially selected list, expressing appreciation of their special interest and suggesting further editorial comment.
- Personal interviews with the editors of the New York City papers brought forth unanimous editorial support.

The results of this publicity campaign were extremely satisfactory and were, in measure, rather striking. Our clipping bureau cut nearly 1,100 separate clippings, 181 of which were editorials

and 915 news stories. The news stories alone showed that 12,595 inches of space were devoted to a discussion of the attack on the health department. We received over 1,250 inches of favorable editorial comment. Publicity experts figure that not more than one-fifth of actual results ever appear in a clipping bureau service. On this basis we secured the surprising total of 69,225 inches of space. This is more than a mile.

Practically all of the editorials were strongly favorable, regardless of the newspapers' political affiliations, and the same can be said of the news stories, with the exception of the very limited publication of a statement attacking the health department, issued by the introducer of the bills.

Four pamphlets or circulars comprised the printed matter which contained the "general orders" of the campaign—the basic arguments against the proposed legislation and in favor of the department's appropriations. Fifty-five thousand copies of these were sent to prominent persons throughout the state with appropriate letters.

The circular letters were most carefully prepared in order that they might not carry the impression that the movement was a display of artificially prepared sentiment. In all cases the recipients were asked to read as carefully as possible the memoranda and briefs which accompanied the letters and to write or telegraph to the legislature *any* opinion that they might reach upon consideration of the arguments presented. This is very different and creates a very different impression upon the legislators from merely seeking letters against a bill.

Remember that all the letters were read against a background of newspaper publicity. They brought forth thousands of personally written letters, telegrams, resolutions and petitions which showered in upon the legislature. In the early stages of the campaign one legislative committee chairman said that he had received a thousand letters of protest. Another received two hundred telegrams in one day. Inasmuch as the campaign ran on with increasing vigor for three weeks, these and others in the legislature undoubtedly received several thousand letters. One man characterized it as a snow storm—another said he had enough to carpet his office a foot deep.

The newspaper publicity and the letter campaigns were dovetailed into the field work. The field work, however, by reason of

the personal contact with prominent citizens throughout the state was, in large measure, responsible for the hundreds of appeals by prominent citizens to their legislators.

The newspaper publicity may be likened to the advertising in a merchandising campaign; the circular letters to the selling letters, and the field work to the appeal of the salesman for orders.

Two field agents visited thirty-five cities to organize and take part in public meetings at which resolutions were adopted, published in the newspapers and transmitted to the leaders and to the local representatives in the legislature. This action was made the basis of editorial comment, and the agents visited many editors and discussed with them the merits of the bills and the desirability of aiding in the movement to preserve the department's work.

In twenty-six localities meetings were called by the mayors, thus serving to give expression to official as well as the unofficial disapproval of the objectionable legislation.

Many organizations were called upon and practically all of them responded. This was especially true of the State Sanitary Officers' Association, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the Federal Council of Churches, the State Grange, the State Conference of Mayors and the Board of Directors of the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis.

This movement was unique in that little, if any, personal work was done with the legislators directly by the association's staff. Not one legislator was asked by any member of the association's staff to vote against the bills nor to try to hold them in committee.

The association did, however, strongly urge the legislative committees not to report them until all the facts had been presented at a public hearing.

Special efforts were made by letter, telephone and telegraph to inform all interested persons of the hearings, and to secure speakers who could discuss the various phases of the subject. As a result on the day of the hearing every seat in the Senate Chamber was occupied and there were many standing. And due to careful selection it wasn't merely "crowd." It was crowd that counted—each person representing some influential group in the community.

None of the bills passed. The most important and far-reaching result of the campaign, however, was the educational effect of

so widespread an effort to focus public opinion on a social service department of the state government. Never before in New York state had public health received such thorough discussion; never before had newspapers placed themselves on record to so large an extent in favor of the state's health work; never before had the people of the state so generally been brought to realize the significance of the department of health in the daily existence of each individual.

The people of the state know now that the health department is their department, that its work is their work and for their benefit. Consequently regulations are enacted with a minimum of protest and health work is more than ever before an accepted function of state government.

It is safe to say also that it will be extremely difficult for any effort to undermine the work of the state department of health in the near future to succeed in any considerable degree. Of course bills may be introduced to repeal important provisions of the health law, but legislators and politicians throughout the state realize now, as never before, the extent of popular support of the health department's work, and while nothing is more difficult to predict than the course of legislation, it seems unlikely that the leaders of any political party would consider giving such an attempt party sanction.

To keep machine politics of the old, bad type out of social service activities involves also, of course, the securing of the right men for important executive positions. In this, the lay unofficial organizations interested in the various phases of governmental affairs have important duties. Chief among these is an obligation, that nearly all will immediately accept, to support civil service reform and to combat all efforts to weaken the application of wise civil service laws. Beyond, however, there is another obligation—the duty to stimulate interest in public service among men of high type and high ideals and possessing the proper qualifications to fill either elective or appointive office. It frequently happens that such coöperating organizations can be of inestimable service in urging men of the right type to take civil service examinations, and offer themselves for appointment outside the civil service.

All of this, of course, assumes an absolutely disinterested, non-

partisan attitude on all social service questions and in all relations with parties and officials.

The value of such unofficial coöperating agencies was very strikingly attested by Governor Charles S. Whitman, in a recent address before the North Atlantic State Tuberculosis Conference. The governor expressed his gratification that so large a part had been taken in the tuberculosis movement by interested citizens and lay organizations:

“We need these local associations and societies,” he said, “to hold the local authorities to a high sense of duty and to furnish the stimulus for securing the funds with which to carry on the work.”